

Minerva

Doctors from Israel report an unusual trio of women with antiphospholipid syndrome who survived pregnancy and childbirth despite a history of stroke (*Seminars in Arthritis and Rheumatism* 1998;28:26-9). The women were treated with a cocktail of aspirin and anticoagulants during pregnancy and all had healthy babies. Although they escaped any thrombotic events, all of them eventually developed hypertension, and two were delivered by caesarean section.

Top competitive cyclists push their bodies to the limits of endurance, and injury rates are high. Endofibrosis of the external iliac arteries is a rare but potentially career stopping complication of punishing training schedules; it is thought to be due to repeated flexion and extension of the artery during cycling, combined with a high cardiac output (*Vascular Surgery* 1998;32:323-8). There is no consensus about treatment, but endarterectomy relieves pain and may allow the athlete to carry on competing. Long term outcome is unknown.

A gluten free diet restores the intestinal mucosa but not necessarily the wellbeing of adults with coeliac disease (*Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology* 1998;33:933-8). A general health survey of 89 patients who had avoided gluten for 10 years found that the women, but not the men, reported poorer health than the general population. The authors tentatively suggest that women, who prepare their own food, are more likely to find the diet irksome than men, who are "somewhat more inclined" to have their meals cooked by someone else.

Minerva was surprised to read that house dust mites have nothing at all to do with house dust (*Respiratory Medicine* 1998;92: 1099-101). The only link is that both are sucked up by vacuum cleaners. Another interesting fact is that populations, which tend to synchronise their life cycle, spend more than half the time glued to household surfaces and are generally resistant to sampling by vacuum. Researchers who take samples at the wrong moment are therefore likely to get the wrong results.

Bicycle handlebars can injure children badly, even in apparently minor accidents (*Paediatrics* 1998;102:596-601). Crash investigators looking in detail at seven such accidents found that injuries were often caused by the child falling onto the end of the handlebar as the front wheel spun perpendicular to the frame. Redesigning bicycles to limit rotation of the front wheel might reduce the risk of truncal injury, they conclude.

The E4 isoform for apolipoprotein E is a genetic risk factor for Alzheimer's disease, and a study in *Nature Medicine* finds that it is also linked to dementia in people infected with HIV (1998;4:1182-3). In one cohort of 44 individuals, 11 with the E4 isoform were twice as likely to develop dementia as those without it. They were also more likely to develop peripheral neuropathy.

Laparoscopically assisted vaginal hysterectomy is an alternative to abdominal hysterectomy, but randomised comparisons are scarce. One in *Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (1998;92:321-6) shows, predictably, that laparoscopic surgery takes longer but patients tend to be discharged earlier and convalesce faster than after more traditional surgery. Sixty five women were randomised and only two refused their allocated procedure.

Readers who are allergic to cats might want to avoid domestic flights and cinemas in New Zealand (*New Zealand Medical Journal* 1998;111:356-8). An extensive study of dust samples from public places confirmed that the cat allergen Fel d 1 is everywhere—and is likely to be in high enough concentrations to trigger asthma on cinema seats and domestic airline seats. Seats on international flights were generally clearer of the allergen, perhaps because passengers wear freshly laundered clothes on long haul flights.

Laparoscopic surgeons frustrated by unpredictable human assistance can look forward to steadier help from robots (*Human Reproduction* 1998;13:2748-50). One called AESOP holds and manoeuvres the laparoscopic camera and is controlled by the surgeon's hand, foot, or voice. It is less prone to camera shake than a junior doctor and generally more receptive to direct orders, but enthusiasts emphasise that robots will never replace human surgeons, just help them to do their best.

Evidence based medicine is out of control and running roughshod over doctors' clinical autonomy, writes one detractor in *Hoolet*, the Scottish magazine of the Royal College of General Practitioners (1998 September:6-7). The movement, laudable in principle, has been hijacked by statisticians, economists, and managers, who direct clinical decisions without clinical knowledge and do not have to carry the can when things go wrong, he argues.

Farmers have a slightly increased risk of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, particularly if



This 55 year old woman with breast cancer had perfect fingernails until she started a course of cytotoxic chemotherapy. The perfectly spaced transverse grooves, or Beau's lines, provide a striking record of her last six cycles of weekly chemotherapy. Beau was a 19th century French doctor, and his lines are well described in all kinds of serious illness, especially cardiac diseases and emotional trauma.

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they are American and male, researchers from Ohio have found (*Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health* 1998;24:255-61). A meta-analysis of 36 studies gave a relative risk of 1.10 for all farmers and 1.26 for American farmers, but failed to show a link between women farmers and the disease. Perhaps because men are more likely to act as mechanics, carpenters, welders, pest controllers, and vets, they expose themselves to more risk factors than women, suggest the authors.

This week's *BMJ* commemorates the 50th anniversary of a landmark randomised trial, which is posted on our website for enthusiasts to read (www.bmj.com). In 1967 the journal reprinted another famous paper—Joseph Lister's report on antiseptics, published 100 years previously. Soon afterwards, an academic from Lister's old university wrote in dismay to the *BMJ* that readers were asking for reprints and had addressed their letters to the late, great Lister himself.